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RHODE ISLAND

A garden behind bars

A vegetable garden tended by inmates in women's minimum-security unit at the Adult Correctional Institutions is providing short-term sources of nutrition and longer lasting life lessons. **A4**



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Minimum security inmate Patricia Lallier picks vegetables at the Adult Correctional Institutions in Cranston. Women inmates in minimum security at the ACI have started a garden, which provides vegetables that are served in the prison cafeteria.

Program provides new outlook

Garden Time teaches minimum security women inmates at ACI how to plant and grow vegetables

By JOHN HILL JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

CRANSTON — Patricia Lallier was in the garden Tuesday, cradling an armful of fresh-picked tomatoes that counselors at the Adult Correctional Institutions hope will be short-term sources of nutrition and longer lasting life lessons as well.

Lallier, an inmate in the women's minimum security unit who works in the prison garden, was promoting the virtues of the chocolate cherry tomato. Later, she said she was fond of all the denizens of the garden which has been dug, tilled and maintained since spring by the approximately 45 inmates in women's minimum security.

"They're better than people," she said of the vegetables, herbs and flowers that have thrived in the inmates' care. "They don't talk back to you. They don't judge you. And all you have to do is give of yourself, and a little time, a little manure."

The garden, about 55 by 70 feet, has eight vegetable beds, aligned in pairs and enclosed by a strip of plantings. In the back, a pumpkin patch stretches along the width of the garden, with a pale yellow pumpkin the size of a tipped-over recliner chair resting in the sea of large, green leaves.

In the other beds, the yellows, oranges and reds of a variety of tomatoes peek out from within the leaves. Next it's the deep purple and pale lavender of eggplants — "I think they look like dinosaur eggs," Jeanne McConnell, another inmate, marveled — then yellow squashes and all manner of beans and herbs.

McConnell said on a regular day, she's out at about 7 a.m. to water the vegetable garden, a flower labyrinth and another garden behind the minimum security unit. Doing it right takes about two hours, she said.



Capt. Michael Moore, left, and Corrections Officer Vincent Paiva look out over the labyrinth that inmates have made off Fleming Road in front of minimum security at the ACI.



A giant pumpkin is being grown by a corrections officer in a competition with inmates.

"The days fly by," she said, the sleeves of her green prison suit rolled up to her shoulders, her feet bare. "I used to read three books a week. Now it takes me a month to read one book, because I'm out here so much."

Plantings that were little stalks that needed careful tending in the spring are sprawling over each other in a contest for sun and soil.

"The green beans, if we had something tall enough, they go as high as that building," she said. "They go up, down. They tie themselves around the other plants."

The garden came to be with the help of a group of volunteers — Kate Lacouture, Terry Meyer and Vera Bowen — who formed a group called Garden Time that teaches the women about organizing and maintaining a garden (they run a similar program for lifers in the men's maximum prison). The Rhode Island Federation of Garden Clubs, of which Bowen is a past president, donated the seedlings.

Lacouture said very early on, their role changed from managing to advising.

"The women worked so hard," she said. "... We took a more laid-back approach and sort of let things evolve. Which is fun, and that's how gardens are."

Garden duty has obvious attractions for the inmates: a chance to walk barefoot in the fresh air, or the occasional cherry tomato snack.

But Kenneth Findlay, transitional services coordinator for the Department of Corrections, said the agency benefits, too. The vegetables grown in the garden are served in the prison cafeteria, he said, improving nutrition and saving money.

Garden work is open to all inmates in the minimum security building, he said. The garden can be seen from the windows of the medium security unit, he said, and seeing it provides an incentive for medium security inmates to improve themselves and earn transfer to minimum.

It also has rehabilitative value beyond learning the skills of landscaping and horticulture. Gardening is hard work, he said, the kind that requires one to keep up to it to see the end result.

It's not a leap to use the garden to show that when the inmates leave, they'll need to stick with their addiction treatment programs and counseling sessions in order to see their lives eventually turn around. It's a message that wasn't lost on Lallier, who is scheduled to be released next month. "It shows me that with a little hard work and help, anything is possible," she said. "Before, I didn't have any hobbies," she said. "I didn't think enough of myself. I used drugs to hide from that. Now I know how to help a plant to live. Watching it, to nurture it. It gives me a different look at things outside." jhill@providencejournal.com (401) 777-7181